

VZCZCXRO5412
OO RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHLM #2135/01 3621105
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 281105Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5035
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA IMMEDIATE 9738
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD IMMEDIATE 6676
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU IMMEDIATE 4742
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE 3416
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 0422
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO IMMEDIATE 3508
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 2590
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI IMMEDIATE 7240
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA IMMEDIATE 0304
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI IMMEDIATE 5009
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 1652
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002135

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/28/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION LEADER CONCERNED DE-MERGER
OF NORTH-EAST COULD FURTHER DERAIL PEACE PROCESS

REF: A. COLOMBO 2113

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 2046

[1](#)C. COLOMBO 1763

Classified By: DCM James R. Moore for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Since October, the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) has discussed de-merging the north and east, currently administered as a single province per the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accords. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its proxies have said a continued merger is an essential pre-requisite for negotiating a peace settlement with the GSL. On December 28, opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe shared with DCM a document from the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) on the peace process that calls for a referendum on de-merging the north and the east "as soon as an agreement is concluded with the LTTE." Wickremesinghe worried that once the document is publicized, the LTTE will have an excuse to boycott negotiations, making any agreement impossible. He requested that Ambassador Blake meet with GSL ministers to reiterate the importance, to prospects for achieving a negotiated settlement, of maintaining the north-east merger. The Indians have also expressed concern that the de-merger strays from the 1987 Indo-Lanka accord, which calls for a referendum only after paramilitary groups have been disarmed. End summary.

OPPOSITION LEADER, INDIA, BOTH
WORRIED ABOUT POTENTIAL DE-MERGER:

[1](#)2. (C) On December 28, the DCM met with opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe at the latter's urgent request. Wickremesinghe shared a document he obtained from Tissa Witerane, Minister of Science and Technology and chair of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC), on the ethnic conflict. The document contains Witerane's amendments to a Panel of Experts (PoE) report urging extensive devolution measures (Ref B). Part of Witerane's document states: "The merger of the north and east should be a decision to be taken by the people of the east as

a referendum. This can be held as soon as an agreement is concluded with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)." Wickremesinghe posited that President Rajapaksa would circulate the APRC document by next week and use it to rally his Sinhalese support base, many of whom support a de-merger. The problem, Wickremesinghe assessed, would be that such a position would give the LTTE an excuse to refuse to negotiate with the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL).

¶3. (C) The DCM noted that Assistant Secretary Boucher, during his October visit to Sri Lanka, had encouraged President Rajapaksa to accept the merger as it stands in order to keep the peace process alive (Ref C). Wickremesinghe asked that Ambassador Blake pass along a similar message to key GSL ministers next week. The DCM asked what the UNP was doing to lobby against the de-merger, and Wickremesinghe said his party chairman would speak to President Rajapaksa. He added that he hoped the Tamil political parties would raise sufficient objections to prevent a de-merger, and he also hoped multiple groups could provide "different types of pressure" on the GSL.

¶4. (C) The Indians also expressed reservations about a possible de-merger in two high-level meetings with the GSL. At an October Non-Aligned Movement meeting in Cuba, Indian premier Manmohan Singh reportedly told President Rajapaksa that the GOI takes the Indo-Lanka accord very seriously, and the north-east merger is a major component of the agreement. The Indian Embassy political counselor (protect) told Pol Chief on December 27 that Singh also raised the merger with President Rajapaksa during the latter's November 26 visit to New Delhi. Our Indian colleague also noted that the

COLOMBO 00002135 002 OF 002

Indo-Lanka accord specifies conditions for a merger referendum in the east, including the disarming of paramilitary groups. That condition, obviously, has not been met. He alluded to an unwritten "understanding" between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments at the time that until such disarmament happens, no such referendum would take place, but that the presidential ruling on the de-merger would be renewed annually. The Indian Embassy has reported the governor's de-merger announcement to New Delhi, he said, but has yet to receive a reaction from the Ministry of External Affairs.

BACKGROUND

¶5. (U) On October 16 the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled that a presidential directive merging the north and the east as a single administrative province (which has been renewed annually for eighteen years) had an insufficient legal and constitutional basis and was therefore void from its inception. However, Pro-LTTE parliamentarians in the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) have vociferously defended the merger, a key stipulation of the 1987 Indo-Lanka accords, as a prerequisite for a negotiated settlement to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Though the Supreme Court ruling left open the possibility of a parliamentary codification of the merger, the governor of the merged province, Rear Admiral Mohan Wijewickrema, told the press on December 25 that the province will be de-merged by early January.

¶6. (U) Wijewickrema's statement was in line with the 2007 budget, presented in parliament November 16, calling for separate allocations to administer the north and east as two provinces. He reportedly said he would continue as governor of the eastern province while President Rajapaksa will appoint another governor for the northern province. The full de-merger may take up to a year to complete as the government sets up administration for the northern province, papers quoted Wijewickrema saying. The Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Buddhist monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) reportedly urged the government to use the Supreme Court ruling to de-merge the

north and the east in a bid to weaken the LTTE support base in the areas.

COMMENT

17. (C) The de-merger storm has been brewing for some time. If, as Wickremesinghe fears, President Rajapaksa releases the APRC document in order to curry favor with Sinhalese nationalists, the Tigers will likely refuse to enter into negotiations. The APRC, the MoU on cooperation between the UNP and the government, and the peace process itself, are all fragile. A public debate on the de-merger can only add volatility to the mix, further endangering the chance of a negotiated settlement. We will continue to press the message at senior levels of the GSL that compromise, restraint, and the sacrifice of short-term political gains are urgently needed if the peace process is to move forward.

BLAKE